

Welcome to the 8th NY Underground Film Festival!

We are fairs to return for our year better and most ambitious anchor, with beyond 140 films and videos that they select to the Archives of the Film of the Anthology. Eight years a lot seems like a time a lot and while ours festival it has changed a lot in the course of the years, our objective remains the same one: for showcase the films and the videos bet-ter from the fringe external of the independent cinematography. With films from fifteen different lands, which this year Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Finland, France, Germany, Gross Britain, Japan, who the Netherlands, Norway and Russlands show, are we proudly to say that this our most international lining up to now is. You are on the view for visitors of Europe, how are we the welcome of Audiovisions (Austria), of Maldoror (Grossbritannien and Germany), of Sonic Genetics (Netherland) and of other! And if you miss out in the strange world of Winnipeg, Canada, like seen in Opening Night's Hey, Happy!, then you really do not know, what other is! ¹

So begins the 8th Annual New York Underground Film Festival's (NYUFF) annual letter from the director. Composed with the help of Altavista's inept translating program Babblefish, it manages to exude the cool irreverence NYUFF has cultivated over its eight years, while simultaneously clarifying the fest's international focus and current obsession with all things digital. NYUFF is one of the best-known underground film festivals in the country and around the world. Operating out of New York City's Anthology Film Archives, the fest attracts major press attention, including taste-making papers like the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*, and local and international curators and festival directors. Critics have hailed it as "the undisputed king of DIY fests," "in between Warhol's Factory and Manson's family," and "gaining momentum like a nipple-pierced Sundance."² Meanwhile, curators look to it for new work and undiscovered talent. Over the years, filmmakers like Portland's Matthew McCormick, Chicago's

¹ Ed Halter and Babblefish, "Welcome to the 8th NY Underground Film Festival." *8th Annual New York Underground Film Festival Program Book* (March 2001), 2.

² *The Village Voice* and *The Independent*, quoted from the New York Underground Film Festival website, www.nyuff.com

James Fotopolos, and Brooklyn's Jane Gang and Bobby Abate have all enjoyed screenings at venues like the Lincoln Center, New York City's Robert Beck Memorial Cinema, Vancouver's Blinding Light and Chicago Filmmakers' Kino-Eye. Because of such media and curatorial attention, NYUFF's annual line-up does much to shape the definition of underground for the rest of the country.

"What is 'Underground'?" asks NYUFF's entry form, "We believe that's something best left for filmmakers to answer for themselves," the festival answers:

When selecting films for exhibition, we seek to go beyond what mainstream venues show to present works of an innovative, subversive, uncompromising, adventurous and at times controversial nature. The NYUFF exists to support and promote films that push boundaries and break new ground -- that challenge, entertain and provoke.³

NYUFF sets itself up as a showcase for an underground that exists outside of itself. Originally started by filmmakers Todd Phillips (*Hated, Road Trip*) and Andrew Gurland (*Screwed*) as a platform for works too controversial, low-budget, or difficult-to-watch to secure mainstream or institutional exhibition, the festival has paradoxically become an institution in its own right. And, despite its claims to the contrary, NYUFF is not merely a showcase for an underground that develops in spite of the festival, it plays a central role in shaping and codifying various characteristics of the milieu. Like any arts institution, NYUFF attempts to represent the current state of its medium while at the same time selecting those works it deems most interesting. This process discovers and even fosters various mini-genres within the underground—ironically, a group that has historically rejected classification.

³ Submission Guidelines, *ibid*.

“Historically a sanctuary for psychotronic splatter and abject grunge,” according to *the Village Voice*, this year’s festival showcased a variety of films and videos reflecting NYUFF’s traditional association with music, alternative culture, and cinematic mayhem—each a celebration of rebelliousness in the face of dominant culture. Music films included Jessica Villines’ documentary *Plaster Caster: A Cockumentary Film* about underground luminary Cynthia Plaster Caster, who made her name by casting rock star’s penises; *Punking Out*, Maggi Carson, Juliusa Kossakowki and Frideric Shore’s grainy 1977 CBGB time-capsule; and Jeff Economy and Darren Hacker’s *...An Incredible Simulation* documentary on midwest tribute bands. Similarly, Jon Leone’s up-close look at backyard wrestling, *Receiver*, Alex Nohe’s documentary about that Black Rock desert carnival of individuality, *Burning Man: The Burning Sensation*, and Helen Stickler’s program on skateboard culture, “Directors of the Board,” all depicted a sub-culture that defines itself primarily through its opposition to all things mainstream. NYUFF reveled in cinematic unruliness as well, programming the likes of George Kuchar’s *Planet of the Vamps*, exploitation auteur Dorris Wishman’s latest, *Satan Was a Lady*, and Shawn Durr’s aggressive queer blood-bath *Fucked in the Face*.

“This isn’t the underground of Hollis Frampton or Maya Deren. It’s the gen-X spawn of Jack Smith, Russ Meyer, and John Waters,” the New York Press cogently surmised last year. And, given the above line-up, this statement would appear to be true. NYUFF’s programming, however, has shifted over the past few years to include increasingly more difficult experimental films and videos. Additionally, the festival has recently embraced video art pieces and installations traditionally shown in gallery spaces and art museums. This year’s inclusion of Kirsten Stoltmann’s *Self-Reflecting* and *True Confessions of an Artist* and video-artist Cecilia

Dougherty's closing night dual-projection *Gone* reflect this shift; both artists have shown in a major gallery or museum—Dougherty at the Whitney and Stoltmann at Donald Young. Their inclusion raises interesting questions about how NYUFF defines the underground. Some, like filmmaker Sarah Jacobson (*I Was a Teenage Serial Killer*, *Mary Jane's Not A Virgin Anymore*), find fault with this kind of programming, insisting that legitimate art venues are already open to these kinds of media-makers. She believes that NYUFF programs these media makers at the expense of those who don't have access to other venues. For her, the underground is a place that embraces work not legitimized by mainstream cultural institutions, like Durr's *Fucked in the Face*, and Jacobson's own *Mary Jane's Not A Virgin Anymore*. Yet, NYUFF's recent programming generally reflects the avant-garde's on-going search for artistic legitimization. Operating out of the fertile crescent of avant-garde filmmaking, Anthology Film Archives, the festival appears to be repositioning the underground as less of a celebration of all things rebellious and more a part of a culturally legitimate art practice. By programming works sanctioned as art by mainstream cultural institutions alongside those that do not enjoy the same cultural cache, NYUFF attempts to extend the legitimization of the first group to those of the latter.

NYUFF's project resulted in a number of similar looking videos in this year's program. Following Stoltmann's video-art style lead, each is short, sparsely shot, and features the maker. And, like Stoltmann's work, each could easily be transferred to a gallery or museum setting. In both Stoltmann's *Self-Reflecting* and *True Confessions of an Artist* the artist speaks directly to the camera. In *Self-Reflecting*, a bikinied, smoking, and dish-washing Stoltmann turns to the camera and says "I've been doing a lot of self-reflecting lately..." while in *True Confessions* she repeats the phrase, "I am a very good artist" over and over to pixlevision, high 8, and digital

video cameras. Rather than display the result of her self-reflecting, both pieces focus instead on these processes, mining the vague sense of self-involvement necessary for making art. Moreover, the emphasis on their performative nature, revealed through the careful juxtaposition of costume, prop, and camera—like the bikini and dishes of *Self-Reflecting*, and the various recording formats of *True Confessions*—ironically comment on culture’s obsession with the artist as cult-of-personality. In style and content, Stoltmann’s work emerges out of a long line of single-channel video art. Moreover, it addresses concerns specific to the gallery context where video art is exhibited and collected on the basis of the artists name. While trenchant in this context, the pieces do not easily translate to a festival setting where artists garner fleeting attention in limited screenings and rarely sell their work.

Like *Self-Reflecting* and *True Confessions*, Jerry Dummond’s *Spit*, Patty Chang’s *Helium*, and Zakery Weiss’s *Communication* also place the artist at the center of each piece. Yet, while Stoltmann’s work is an incisive commentary on art-world politics, these pieces range from simple oddities to odd aggrandizement of the twenty-something artist lifestyle. Roughly two minutes long and shot in a single take, Dummond’s *Spit* consists of a tightly framed shot of the artist spitting and sucking on a glass above the camera. A simple exercise in gross-out tactics, Dummond manages to complete it with a certain art-school finesse, turning up the image contrast and magnifying the sound of each slurp. Chang’s *Helium* is similarly absurd, featuring a two minute medium shot of the artist sucking helium from balloons filled with water and shrieking over-the-top epitaphs of pleasure as her face becomes drenched with water. Certainly a parody of the pornographic money shot, *Helium* is also a performance piece, celebrating the artist’s acting and ludicrous conception. Unlike either *Spit* or *Helium*, Weiss’s *Communication* is a thoughtless glorification of the maker and his life. Described by the maker as “familial love in

the age of D.A.R.E.,” he writes that the piece “is an actual recording of a most harrowing conversation that took place between my Grandmother and I during one day in 2000. If you watch and listen closely enough, you too will experience the sheer terror and gut-wrenching degradation that I experienced during those six minutes.”⁴ The video consists of an extreme low-angle close-up of the artists nostrils and mouth while he talks on the phone with his grandmother. The conversation is excruciating not only because of this imagery, but also because Weiss’s unbearable behavior. Weiss describes himself up as the nit-picked grandson, yet his video portrays him as an uncommunicative hipster who derides his grandmother with vague pop culture references and blasé quips. Seemingly shot to convey the disparity between generations, *Communication* does little more than revel in the worst aspects of hipster art-culture. Unlike Stoltmann’s ironic self-involvement, *Communication* is self-involved to the point of blindness.

While each of these pieces varies in its success, as a group they represent NYUFF’s developing interest and patronage of video-art pieces. Likewise, they also represent a growing trend among underground media makers as well. As works of this nature circulate among underground venues, they influence more and more makers and curators in their output and programming, generating loose typages and slowly transforming the underground.

*It is have much hoo-ha about new technologies, of the video Internet and digital during the last year. And while we present work which depends the use of technologies of decoupage-edge - as the extravaganza of twin-screen of Cecilia Dougherty's Gone on Closing Night, the fiction of the camcorder of Gang Tapes, and with the technological the-atrics make-house of George Kuchar, more large documentaries visual display in function this year -- we do not pains become of the 'new Expo media' like some others.*⁵

⁴ Zakery Weiss, “Communication,” *A New Romantic / t.v. sounds*, program description, 8th Annual New York Underground Film Festival Program., 14.

⁵ “Welcome...,” *ibid.*, 2.

Despite NYUFF's rather muddy protestations to the contrary, it programmed a number of techno-inspired digital experimentations at this year's festival. And while digital video and new technology are not new to the festival circuit, NYUFF's programming reveals the development of three distinct types: chaos and noise animation, electronic music videos, and rave-inspired image mixes. Significantly, the majority of these works emerge from traditions and techniques developed in the dance music underground. Some utilize electronic music for inspiration, choreographing imagery to musical rhythms, while others draw upon the improvisational techniques of djs and vjs, freely sampling from a bevy of cinematic sources and continually editing or re-mixing completed work.

Works like Bart Vegter's *Forest-Views* and Richard Mathias Sandoval's *The Residual Artifacts of Communication* make up the first of these types. Both are silent, spare, non-objective animations that have the look and feel of lush canvases of abstract expressionism. Yet, unlike abstract expressionism, neither takes its shape through the physicality of the maker, rather, both mine the possibilities of digital technologies for effect. Vegter describes the composition of his work:

Processing noise with an algorithm produces moving structures: 'Automatoons.' These are used as a starting point (material) for the creation of 'phrases' of varied length. Variations in the structure and density of the phrases is accomplished by changes in materials selected from and by colon-modulation.⁶

Essentially, Vegter shapes imagery generated from digital noise, reformulating detritus of new technologies into an aesthetic form. Similarly, Sandoval evokes a comparable process with the title *Residual Artifacts of Communication*. Described as "rich walls of intricately textured colors and atmospheric soundscapes [which] join to create an objective rendering of an interior state,"

⁶ Bart Vegter, "Forest-Views," Thought Most Secret program description, *ibid.*, 23.

the work attempts to give visual form to aural phenomena.⁷ Despite their strong ties to new technologies, both pieces demonstrate a distinct historical connection to the avant-garde, recalling the early works of animators Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling, and Oscar Fischinger and their efforts to visualize the sonic realm.

NYUFF's line-up of electronic music-inspired videos evoke the avant-garde's early experiments in visual music as well. Sprinkled throughout the program, works like Michaela Schwentner's *Transistor* and Ilppo Pohjola's *Route Master—Theatre of the Motor* and the Austrian-sponsored program "Audiovisions" attempted to flesh out musical concerns in the visual world--whether composed to the four-four beats of techno or the sonic density of noise. Shot with a surveillance camera high above a snowy train station, *Transistor* edits an engine's exit to the low dub beat of a Radian composition. The piece's grey, pixel-fuzz imagery carefully matches the low-fi grain of the music. Similarly, Pohjola's *Routemaster* edits super-8 race-car footage to Merzbow's sonic blasts, creating a "rhythmic montage mosaic about speed and the use of human cadavers in crash tests."⁸ By pairing musicians and image-makers, "Audiovisions" attempts to push this musical impulse one step further. The program "takes the notion of 'music video' completely apart," according to curator Norbert Pfaffenbichler, "re-assembling the concept in new, uniquely minimalist and rhythmic ways through collaborations between video artists and electronic composers. Both visually stark and emotionally rich, 'Audiovisions' plays out like a feature length video/music concert."⁹ Indeed, the pieces range from Richter-inspired pulsating shapes to rushing, super-imposed collages. While certainly rhythmically sensuous and physically soothing, the works eventually begin to run together, suggesting a creative limit to the artist's collaboration.

⁷⁸ *Route Master—Theatre of the Motor*, Fast Food Fuck program description, *ibid.*, 30.⁹ Norbert Pfaffenbichler, *Audiovisions* program description, *ibid.*, 18.

NYUFF's most interesting program of digitally inspired work took shape through curator Frank Scheffer's remix project, "Sonic Genetics"—the sequel to an earlier NYUFF project in which he asked a group of artists to remix a pair of earlier video works: *Sonic Acts and Sonic Images*. "The concept of that project," he explains,

was that seven directors from different artistic backgrounds would be invited to re:mix the same basic raw material to create a corpus of new work. 'Sonic Genetics' extends this idea to its logical conclusion: the 'Sonic Fragments' re:mixes are now themselves re:mixed by a new collective of film artists...the nature of the 'Sonic Genetics' re:mix is analogous with that of an organic lifeform. The project is continuously in flux and changes with each new step. The result is not fixed and static in the way that film is normally a delivered end product. The form and structure is made possible by the nature of digital technology itself and is indeed a direct manifestation of this essential digital aspect.¹⁰

Scheffer's re:mix concept derives directly from rave and concert visuals and vj live mixing techniques. This visual tradition has a long history—well documented by the likes of Gene Youngblood and others—of filmmakers improvising startling montages with found and psychedelic footage in concert and other performance settings. What Scheffer does with "Sonic Genetic"s is restage this tradition in a theatrical setting, stripping its liveness in the process. And, while Scheffer claims that his experiment is not related to the type of visuals populating the rave scene, the products of his experiment look deceptively similar. All emphasize the formal qualities of the imagery, super-imposing and animating them into a visually sensational mosaic and some even utilize dance music as a rhythmic source. While not entirely successful as a static theatrical form, NYUFF's inclusion of "Sonic Genetics" raises interesting questions about context and artistic legitimacy. NYUFF introduced this project as a new direction in filmmaking, essentially codifying and crystallizing an underground practice that the festival

¹⁰ Frank Scherrer, Sonic Genetics (New York Underground Re:Mix) program description, *ibid.*, 30.

already utilizes elsewhere to augment its own music programming. To be fair, the festival included a live version of “Sonic Genetics” but publicized it as an afterthought to the theatrical program. Nevertheless, as an institution that attempts to represent the current state of the underground, and especially one that patronizes the digital underground, NYUFF would presumably be the venue for showcasing and legitimizing work that thrives in alternative, non-theatrical contexts. Since it isn’t, NYUFF basically limits artistic recognition to theatrical works alone, carefully side-stepping the artistry of live-imagery and its associations with dance and drug culture.

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That one possibly our more is varied one year -- if filmmakers on whole earth being enough of university kids to Octogenarians, from many lands and in so many different disciplines and in category operate. So although New York can become more and more like a determined outside-of-city of the mall of the strip, the Underground Filmfestival NY remains decided best!¹¹

Given NYUFF’s programming decisions for this year, the festival appears to be subtly aligning itself with traditional art and cultural institutions. While this shift is made clear through its inclusion and patronage of video art pieces and works by established artists, it also manifests itself through other decisions, namely the recognition of theatrical exhibition over other underground media making practices. Since NYUFF plays a central role in the definition and direction of the underground, its own subtle leanings will be softly echoed across the country as curators and filmmakers circulate the festival’s programming, influencing filmmaking practice and exhibition. Whether filmmakers and curators reject the trends the 8th Annual New York Underground Film Festival defines remains to be seen—perhaps we’ll see next year.

¹¹ “Welcome...”, *ibid.*, 2.